Newspapers by ancestry
https://www.newspapers.com/image/579013670

Downloaded on Mar 26, 2024

MUSIC

The Suburban Lawns: What To Do About Su?

by Bruce D. Rhodewalt

Vex Billingsgate of the Suburban Lawns is mad at the press. "Hearsay becomes history when it's published," he said during an interview conducted a few months back with himself and Lawns co-spokesperson Su Tissue at the International Record Syndicate (IRS) offices in Hollywood. "Silly rumors, misinformation, just ... gab, gab, gab. I'm real glad that you've listened to our record [*Suburban Lawns*, released by their own Suburban Industrial Records and IRS] and we can talk about it. Some people haven't even heard it, but they want to do the interview just because they've heard our name, and I don't appreciate that, because that doesn't advance the ideas that we want to get across. There's no content to the final work. It's just filling up pages on the paper."

What is it that the press has said about the Suburban Lawns? Since the band's inception in 1977, people have called them quirky, oddball, fluid, alluring, ethereal — adequate descriptions — but through it all, the press has concentrated on singer-keyboardist Tissue, as if she were the focal point, or even the leader, of the band. In February 1979, Claude Bessy said, "The Suburban Lawns are not bad, but when Miss Su Tissue joined them for two or three songs there suddenly was that feeling of an unusual event taking place before our unprepared eyes ... That strange unfashionably dressed girl sang like others slip into the first stage of an epileptic fit."

Then the group released "Gidget Goes to Hell" b/w "My Boyfriend" (both sides sung by Su), which was greeted warmly by the press, and hotly by Gidget creator Frederick Kohner, who sued them. In the L.A. *Times*, Kristine McKenna said the band had "three competent male vocalists and accessible pop material, but singer Su Tissue is undeniably the band's secret weapon." In 1980, *Oui* described her as the group's lead singer, although Billingsgate, lead guitarist John McBurney and rhythm guitarist Frankie Ennui have always traded off lead vocals. By the time the second single, "Janitor," was released — with Su Tissue singing only the A side this time and Billingsgate singing "Protection" — the press response was fairly predictable: a good band, but Su's the star.

By this time, whether due to feelings of jealousy on the part of the band's male members — Billingsgate, McBurney, Ennui and drummer Chuck Roast were, after all, playing and singing a full year before Tissue joined the band — or Su's shyness or feelings of guilt or a combination of several balancing factors, conscious efforts were being made to project the preferred — democratic — image. Billingsgate says about the Lawns' ostensible equality, "All we do is get up there and play our music, with the songs and the singers in the order we think makes a good show. If the reviewer can't pick up on that, that's his problem. I can't deal with everyone's ineptitude. If they don't want to acknowledge the rest of the group, *fine!*"

The traditional Suburban Lawns set goes like this: All members of the band are on stage. Su Tissue sits behind the keyboards. They play half the set, the sound being loud, fast, clean, tight and, of course, quirky. Billingsgate, McBurney and Ennui trade off lead vocals. Toward the end of this section, Su comes forward to play a few numbers with Billy's bass, backing him up while he sings. Then she gives the bass back to him and finishes off the set singing at the front of the stage, hanging on to the mike stand and bending over in a seemingly nauseous.

Onstage, Billingsgate seems moved by the *allegro vivace* rhythm to dance and twist in response, while Tissue looks grim and entirely serious about it all. But out of character, they assume the opposite roles. Tissue, seemingly bored, speaks occasionally, usually to crack a joke or relieve what seem over-serious moments. "I'm seriousing myself to death. Agghh!" she says, and it *is* just pop music we're discussing, after all. I saw her grin — during her stiff/grim stage act once — to a friend who was taking pictures. A little, furtive grin that revealed a lot. It *is* fun.

Billingsgate, on the other hand, apparently concerned about the Lawns' image, works hard in interview to explain what the band is about and why it is important. For example, according to him, the band has altered the radio medium in L.A. through the exposure of "Gidget," in such a way that "hopefully, we've inspired other bands to come out and do their own music and express themselves and the way they feel. I think our songs really stick out. There's something a *little* different about them."

One current theory goes as follows: certain local bands — including the Suburban Lawns and Wall of Voodoo — who both have great gimmicks and distinctive, likeable songs, are just now getting into the national market with the release of their first albums and concurrent tours for their support. They're scared, and rightly so. They're in the army now. They are not just playing around town anymore; cute-ness, gimmicks and social connections ar

visitors: Garland Jeffreys

Most music fans first took note of Garland Jeffreys back in 1977, when he performed at the Roxy on the heels of his second album, Ghostwriter. *It was a masterpiece of composition and vocal styling that showed potential and maturity beyond his years. Since then, Jeffreys has released four more albums (two recently for Epic), yet still hasn't broken through on a scale one might expect, though in Europe he had a big single, "Matador," which enabled him to play larger arenas.*

Jeffreys is currently slogging away at the U.S. circuit supporting his new live album, Rock and Roll Adult. *He looks forward to narrating* Reggae Tribute, *a movie being produced by Michael Butler (of* Hair *fame), based on the life of Bob Marley. Jeffreys is also appearing in his first dramatic role opposite an established star in a movie called* The Break, *for which he is also writing the music. A couple of weeks before his appearances here at the Country Club, Garland sat down with me in the hectic bustle that is the Epic offices in Century City. He had been on the go all day and had a taping of Fridays to do later on, but he seemed gracious and thoughtful, and warmed to the questioning.*

—John Sutton-Smith

Weekly: *Can you remember your first musical influences?*

Jeffreys: My first musical adventures were as a baby. My mother had me very young, in her teens, and my parents were into bebop — Charlie Parker and that kind of swing, you know. I won't say swing in the little sense. Swing in the French sense, where it it doesn't swing, it doesn't have it. Rock & roll *can* swing. The music I started to listen to was the Harptones, the Cleftones. Frankie Lymon as a singer was one of my biggest influences vocally.

Weekly: *So the influence of reggae in your music can be attributed to it having a sense of "swing"?*

Jeffreys: Absolutely. Reggae reminds me of the rhythm and blues of the late '50s, with something new. Sometimes when you grow up with a certain kind of music, and you're in modern times, you think maybe you shouldn't like the past because it's old. Reggae gave me the license to like what I *really* liked in the first place. When you hear that early Wailers stuff, for instance, it sounds very much like Clyde McPhatter.

Weekly: *You went down to Jamaica this summer for the Reggae Sunsplash, I understand.*

Jeffreys: Yes. I went down to see the shows, but I was supposed to be affiliated with the movie *Reggae Tribute*. Right now, I don't know what the status of the movie is. I'm still open to doing the narration provided that the movie is done in a good way. I felt that if I was going to do it and involve myself with it, it was my personal responsibility to make sure that

what I was going to narrate was going to be the right thing and at the same time try to influence the movie as much as possible in the direction of good taste; if it's supposed to be about Bob Marley and Jamaica, it had better be about that and not some kind of tits and ass movie. I'm just hopeful they'll be cool about it.

Weekly: *You had dreadlocks for over two years. Why did you cut them?*

Jeffreys: People bothered me a lot because I had them. They would talk about me behind my back and make sounds. Customs bothered the hell out of me, travelling back and forth to Europe. It's not an invisible look, and it became a bothersome thing. I started wearing them for fun and fashion.

Weekly: *But not because you are into the whole Rastafarian ideal?*

Jeffreys: No, not the religion or anything. That's the other thing: people started to relate to me as a Rasta, and I wasn't into that. I don't knock it, but it's just not my experience. I wasn't doing a good job with image wearing the dreads, because the audience got confused. I'm doing a movie next year, and the movie requires a different kind of role than the hair would show. Also, I got tired of it. It became extra baggage in a way. It wasn't really me.

Weekly: *The last two albums,* Escape Artist *and* Rock & Roll Adult, *seem to be a concentrated attempt to bring you to the attention of the American public. The music seems more accessible. Do you feel independent about what you are allowed to put out?*

Jeffreys: I feel a little pressure, but independent on the whole. I'm not in a vacuum. I want success. Anything in *Escape Artist* was what I'd learned up to the point of making the record. I performed about half the songs before I recorded the

Copyright © 2024 Newspapers.com. All Rights Reserved.
Powered by Newspapers.com